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ABSTRACT

A voucher system of schooling would destroy the few democratic gains made in public education in recent years, worsen inequalities that already permeate education, and block opportunities for meaningful reform. Articles included in this special issue are: (1) an introduction, "Why We Are Publishing False Choices" ("Rethinking Schools" Editorial Board); (2) "The Hollow Promise of School Vouchers" (R. Lowe); (3) "Voucher Plans Proliferate: From Colorado to California, Milwaukee to Baltimore" (B. Miner); (4) "'Choice' Will Devastate Our Urban Schools" (M. Waters); (5) "Our Schools Need Money, Not Rhetoric" (C. J. Prentiss); (6) "Choice Is a Smokescreen" (L. Darling-Hammond); (7) "The Debate Is about Privatization, Not Choice" (D. Meier); (8) "Playing Politices with 'Choice'" (G. Orfield); (9) "A Battle for the Soul of Public Education" (W. Furutani); (10) "Questions and Answers about School Choice" ("Rethinking Schools" Editorial Board); (11) "Whittle's Raid on Public Education" (J. Kozol); (12) "Chris Whittle's Trojan Horse" (A. J. Alvarado); (13) "Is Public School 'Choice' a Viable Alternative?" (A. Bastian); (14) "Massachusetts: Robbing the Poor To Pay the Rich" (S. Karp); (15) "Chicago: Public School 'Choice' and Inequality" (J. Kozol); (16) "When "Choice" Equals No Choice" (H. Kohl); and (17) "'Choice' and Public School Reform" (R. Peterkin). (SLD)

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Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future

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false choices

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 2

The Hollow Promise of School Vouchers
by Robert Lowe 3

Voucher Plans Proliferate
by Barbara Miner 6

'Choice' Will Devastate Our Urban Schools
by Maxine Waters 8

Our Schools Need Money, Not Rhetoric
an interview with C.J. Prentiss 9

'Choice' is a Smokescreen
an interview with
Linda Darling-Hammond 10

The Debate is About Privatization, not 'Choice'
an interview with Deborah Meier 11

Playing Politics with 'Choice'
by Gary Orfield 12

A Battle for the Soul of Public Education
by Warren Furutani 13

Questions and Answers about School Choice
Rethinking Schools Editors 14

Whittle's Raid on Public Education
by Jonathan Kozol 17

Chris Whittle's Trojan Horse
by Anthony Alvarado 20

Is Public School 'Choice' a Viable Alternative?
by Ann Bastian 21

Massachusetts: Robbing the Poor to Pay the Rich
by Stan Karp 23

Chicago: Public School 'Choice' and Inequality
by Jonathan Kozol 24

When 'Choice' Equals no Choice
by Herbert Kohl 25

'Choice' and Public School Reform
by Robert Peterkin 28

Resources 32

Rick Reinhard

False Choices

Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future

A Special Edition of Rethinking Schools

Why We Are Publishing *False Choices*

By the Rethinking Schools Editorial Board

"Choice" is an appealing concept. Yet "choice" is also an elastic term with different meanings for different people in different contexts.

Within education, "choice" has become the watchword of conservative forces. Their meaning is clear: providing public money for private schools and substituting the marketplace for a public education system.

The implications of their position are also clear. A voucher system of schooling would destroy the few democratic gains made in public education in recent decades, worsen the inequalities that already permeate education, and block opportunities for meaningful reform.

A False Panacea

There are, of course, serious problems with public education in this country. Perhaps most troublesome, public schools offer highly unequal opportunities — which usually translate into inferior opportunities for the poor and for children of color. In this context, it is understandable that some might turn to "choice" as an alternative. But, as the authors in this special issue argue, "choice" is a false panacea. Despite its appealing rhetoric, in the long run it will limit access to quality education for those who most deserve expanded opportunities.

Two themes dominate in *False Choices*. One is a concern for equality of educational opportunity. The other is a commitment to public education as an integral part of our democratic vision for this country. "Choice" stands in opposition to both of these concerns.

Diverse Perspectives

Since the debate around vouchers takes place in both the political and educational arenas, we have included essays from both educators and policy makers. They look at the issue from diverse perspectives, but they are united in their understanding that private school "choice" poses a profound threat to our hopes for equality and democracy.

We also have included articles on public school "choice" plans. Within a district, public school "choice" is often identified with so-called "magnet" or specialty schools designed to preserve the racial balance in urban districts by offering special programs. "Choice" has also been used to describe teacher-controlled public schools, like the highly publicized Central Park East in Harlem, that emphasize a clear school philosophy and program developed collectively by the staff. On an interdistrict level, some states have instituted public school "choice" plans that mimic private voucher plans.

While some public school "choice" programs provide some excellent opportunities, they frequently absorb a disproportionate share of a district's human and fiscal resources, relatively impoverishing the schools of students whose parents did not choose or whose choices were not honored.

Yet the choice programs that dominate today's policy agenda involve the privatization of education, and the problems they pose are far greater. As the authors in *False Choices* underscore, we must build better schools for all, not islands of excellence for the already privileged. Our children — all our children — deserve no less. ❐

Rick Reinhard

Vince Bushell

The Hollow Promise of School Vouchers

By Robert Lowe

For nearly 150 years, public education in the United States has been recognized as a fundamental public good. That recognition is now under attack. Building on a decade of national power that has radically redefined the nature of public responsibility, conservatives, under the aegis of "choice," have proposed the substitution of markets for public schools. Further, they have made their arguments plausible to diverse constituencies.

Despite the grave inadequacies of public education today, however, throwing schools open to the marketplace will promote neither excellence nor equality for all. Rather, it will enhance the freedom of the privileged to pursue their advancement unfettered by obligation to community.

Current efforts to promote an educational marketplace through choice trace directly to the work of conservative economist Milton Friedman. Writing in the mid-1950s, Friedman proposed that every family be given a voucher of equal worth for each child attending school. Under this plan, families could choose any school that met rudimentary government oversight (which Friedman likened to the sanitary inspection of a restaurant). Parents could add their own resources to the value of a voucher, and, presumably, schools could set their own tuition level and admission requirements.[1]

At the time, Friedman's proposal failed to attract widespread support. While some people excoriated public schools during the 1950s for curricular laxity that allegedly gave Russians the jump in the space race, optimism prevailed that curriculum innovation and more attention to advanced placement classes would remedy the problem. Further, for the first decade after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, optimism remained high that public schools could create equality of educational opportunity. In fact, it was school desegregation that most underscored the conservative nature of Friedman's stance.

The First Choice Program

The first choice program provided white students in Virginia public funds to attend private academies in order to avoid attending public schools with Blacks.[2] Friedman addressed this matter in his proposal. Although he expressed his personal desire for integration, he

continued on next page

believed that state-imposed desegregation violated parents' freedom to choose. Thus Friedman asserted the primacy of freedom over equality and finessed the lack of freedom the less-than-equal possessed.

During much of the 1960s confidence prevailed that public education could promote both excellence and equity. But by the 1980s such confidence had seriously deteriorated in a political climate that identified the state as the perpetrator rather than the ameliorator of social and economic ills.[3] A wave of national reports contributed to this climate by maintaining that the United States was losing its competitive edge because schools were inadequately developing students' skills.[4] At the same time, sustained inequities in educational outcomes between white students and students of color seriously undermined faith in public schools' capacity to provide equal educational opportunity. In such an environment, a new private school choice program that emphasizes opportunities for low-income students of color was linked with a new, more public relations oriented defense of the educational marketplace. This new approach met considerable success in creating the illusion that choice would serve all.

The link was forged publicly in June 1990 when Wisconsin State Rep. Annette "Polly" Williams (D-Milwaukee), the African-American sponsor of the highly publicized Milwaukee Parent Choice Program, traveled to Washington, D.C., as a featured participant in the unveiling of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* by John Chubb and Terry Moe.[5] Rarely do scholarly works become media events, but this event signified the launching of a vigorous campaign to promote educational choice. It also implied the existence of far broader support for opening schools to the marketplace than the historically conservative constituency for choice would suggest. Although it would be a mistake to conclude that support for "choice" represents a consensus among diverse political forces, it rapidly is becoming the major policy issue affecting schools in the United States today.

Despite the grave inadequacies of public education, throwing schools open to the marketplace will promote neither excellence nor equality for all.

Neither Equity nor Excellence

At the cutting edge of this issue are the choice program in Milwaukee and Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. The former, a modest program that provides public funds for private education, appears to demonstrate in practice that choice expands equality of opportunity. The latter attempts to theoretically justify the abandonment of all public education on the grounds that choice will produce educational excellence.

Taken together, the program and the book suggest that choice will provide both equity and excellence. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. While the Milwaukee program — a kind of affirmative action effort — may indeed provide greater opportunity for some of its participants, Chubb and Moe's brief for providing all individuals with vouchers to attend private schools fails to sustain its thesis and has dire implications for equality of educational opportunity.

The Milwaukee Parent Choice Program has received attention far out of proportion to its immediate impact. In a district that enrolls nearly 100,000 students, the program was originally intended to provide 1,000 low-income students with approximately $2,500 each so that they might attend a non-sectarian private school. Only 558 students applied for the 1990-91 school year, and merely 341 ultimately enrolled in the seven schools that agreed to participate.

Despite the program's small scale, nationally prominent conservatives vocally endorsed it. Even before the school term began, it won praise from the Bush administration, the *Wall Street Journal*, Wisconsin's Republican Governor Tommy Thompson, and the head of the powerful Bradley Foundation. And despite the questionable success of the program during its first year, many advocates persist in seeing it as a first step in restoring the nation's educational health. They believe this only can be accomplished by breaking up the public school monopoly.

The program also has spawned vocal opposition. Some antagonists, like Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction Herbert Grover, view Polly Williams as the unwitting accomplice of right-wing business interests bent on destroying a public good.[6] Others oppose the program because they fear that it presages an end to a variety of perceived goods, including desegregation, teachers' unions, a common curriculum, and provisions for children with special needs.

Thus, both proponents and opponents rightly see the Williams initiative as an entering wedge in a national battle over the future shape of education in the United States. It is important, however, to see the Milwaukee Choice Program on its own terms. That many conservatives support the plan does not make Polly Williams their agent. Rather, she has responded to the sustained failure of the Milwaukee Public Schools to provide an acceptable education to low income children of color.

During 1989-90, for instance, Hispanics maintained an average GPA of 1.47 and African Americans averaged 1.31. In three of Milwaukee's fifteen high schools, between 36% and 40% of Blacks were suspended. The previous year the annual dropout rate was 17.8% for African Americans and 17.4% for Hispanics.[7]

In the face of miserable average grades and appalling suspension and dropout rates, Williams has enabled a small number of students to seek an education elsewhere — partly in community-based schools that have long served African Americans and Hispanics. Under the circumstances it makes little sense to berate the program for violating the ideal of the common school or

the goal of an integrated society. Such unrealized visions are inadequate justifications for denying a few children a potential opportunity to pursue an education of value. As advocates of choice are quick to point out, the Milwaukee program gives some options to low income families that the well-to-do have long exercised, and virtually no one challenges the right of the privileged to either move to their schools of choice in the suburbs or to attend private schools.

Troubling Questions

Yet the program does raise questions. While the $2,446 each student could bring as tuition to a private school did expand choice during the program's first year, this relatively small voucher meant that parents could not choose, if they desired, elite, overwhelmingly white preparatory schools. Second, those who applied for the program were probably among the most aggressive about pursuing quality education for their children and, consequently, among the most enfranchised. Third, applications exceeded openings in participating private schools. Admission was to be based on a lottery system, but without the Department of Public Instruction monitoring the process it might have been difficult for participating schools to resist taking the strongest applicants. Even if the program were an outstanding success, it would not constitute a brief for substituting the marketplace for public schools.

The continuing praise of the Bush administration notwithstanding, there were troubling signs during the program's first year. Most important, the Juanita Virgil Academy, the one school essentially created in response to the voucher-bearing clientele, suffered inadequate books and supplies from the outset and soon closed, disrupting the lives of the 63 "choice" students who had enrolled. In addition, some 15 students were dismissed for disciplinary reasons or learning problems, so that only 259 of the 341 enrollees completed the first semester in schools of choice.[8] Finally, nearly 100 nongraduating members of that group elected not to participate in the program during its second year.[9] Problems within the Milwaukee Choice Program, as the following analysis of Chubb and Moe's book will indicate, multiply when "choice" expands to include everyone.

In *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, Chubb and Moe offer an elaborated version of Milton Friedman's argument. Like Friedman, they say little about equality of educational opportunity per se, but hold that education will improve for all through opening it to the competition of the marketplace. They go so far as to maintain that public schools generally are incapable of providing effective education because the way they are governed limits their capacity to remedy shortcomings.

Chubb and Moe point out numerous problems that afflict public education today. They observe that principals cannot hire or fire teachers. They note that teachers run a gauntlet of irrelevant certification requirements, possess limited autonomy in the classroom, and are denied colleagues who share a common purpose. And they recognize that parents have little influence over the schools their children must attend. The authors identify such unsatisfactory conditions as key contributors to what they perceive as the degenerate character of education in the United States.

Rick Reinhard

They further contend that many of the educational reforms mandated in the 1980s — such as longer school terms, more homework, and increased academic requirements for high school graduation — were guaranteed to fail because they were imposed bureaucratically. In fact, they see bureaucracy as the central impediment to effective schools. They believe it strangles the capacity of principals and teachers to fashion schools after their own vision and renders them unresponsive to the interests of parents. The solution to poor education, according to Chubb and Moe, is not the futile effort to impose quality through increased bureaucratic controls but to eliminate such controls.

Chubb and Moe hold that public schools are necessarily bureaucratic since in democratically controlled organizations bureaucracy is the means through which competing political interests institutionalize their influence. They argue that private schools, in contrast, tend to be autonomous because accountability does not spring from bureaucratic regulation, but from the market mechanism. If a private school fails to do an effective job, according to their reasoning, clients will leave it for another. Chubb and

continued on page 26

From Colorado to California, Milwaukee to Baltimore

Voucher Plans Proliferate

By Barbara Miner

To listen to some, the concept of "choice" or "vouchers" is the greatest educational invention since the chalkboard or the lead pencil.

Across the country, these educational buzzwords are being hurled right and left as part of a relentless, well-financed effort to replace our public school system with a marketplace approach to education.

The outcome of the presidential election is unlikely to dramatically alter the balance of forces. While bolstered by the support of the Bush Administration, advocates of vouchers are waging a multi-pronged fight that relies as much on local and statewide initiatives as it does on national legislation. Further, they are supported by major corporations and well-endowed foundations that are committed to their pro-voucher, marketplace agenda regardless of who occupies the White House.

While it's impossible to predict what may happen to any one voucher proposal, conservative forces clearly have seized the initiative. They have already captured significant ideological ground, for example, by using the progressive-sounding term "choice" as opposed to a more neutral term such as "vouchers."

"There is no question that there is a tremendous momentum around the country behind this [voucher] movement," notes Quentin Quade, a professor of political science at Marquette University and head of the newly created Virgil C. Blum Center for Parental Freedom in Education. Displaying the optimism of pro-voucher advocates, Quade argues, "It's just a question of time before the dam breaks."

Some 37 states considered "choice" legislation in 1992, up from only a handful a few years earlier, according to the Center for Choice in Education of the U.S. Department of Education. Proposals included both private voucher and public school "choice" plans, although controversy centered on the voucher plans.

In some states, such as Colorado and California, voucher advocates plan to take their proposals directly to the voters in statewide referenda. In Chicago and Los Angeles, supporters of vouchers are filing court challenges. In Baltimore and Dade County, the "choice" battle cry has translated itself into for-profit "charter" schools that have contracts with the local school board. And in several cities such as Indianapolis and Milwaukee, private businesses and foundations have decided to get a jump start on hoped-for legislative victories and have set up privately funded voucher plans.

On a national level, "choice" and vouchers are the centerpiece of the America 2000 education plan first proposed by President Bush in the spring of 1991. The latest Bush proposal, announced in June 1992, would give $1,000 scholarships to low-and middle-income students to attend whatever public, private or religious school they want. The four-year pilot program calls for $500 million in the first year for 500,000 children. The money would go directly to the parents, without "any cumbersome federal regulations," according to Education Secretary Lamar Alexander.

Following is a sampling of the voucher and "choice" initiatives that have proliferated across the country.

• **Colorado**: A referendum on the November ballot is seen by both supporters and opponents as a watershed in the national controversy. Under the plan, parents would get anywhere from $2,100 to $2,500 in public funds to send their children to private or parochial schools or to educate them at home. If approved, the measure would go into effect in the 1993-94 school year. The State Board of Education voted 6-1 to oppose the plan while unanimously reaffirming support for public school choice.

• **California**: California supporters of vouchers hope to place a referendum on the November 1994 ballot that is similar to the Colorado plan. The measure would allocate approximately $2,500 to all children to attend any private or religious school. Critics have charged that the measure would siphon off more than $1 billion from public schools, which are already suffering from the austerity budget passed by the California legislature this summer. The measure came close to being on the November 1992 ballot, but was derailed at the last minute by a court challenge arguing that there were insufficient signatures to meet the legal requirements for a referendum.

• **Wisconsin**: Milwaukee has a three-year-old experiment under which several hundred low-income children receive $2,500 in public tax-dollars to attend a private, non-sectarian school. (See "The Hollow Promise of School Vouchers," beginning on page 3.)

• **Pennsylvania**: A proposal, defeated earlier this year, would have provided up to $900 to every school-age child in the state to attend a public school in another district or a private or parochial school. Opponents stressed that the plan would have particularly discriminated against poor people, because the $900 would not have been enough for tuition at most private or parochial schools.

• **Massachusetts**: The legislature passed a plan in September 1991 under which students could attend a public school in another district. The plan called for the original district to pay the cost of schooling in the student's new district — even if the per pupil expenditures were significantly higher. (See the article, "Robbing the Poor to Pay the Rich," on page 23.) A similar proposal has been made in Wisconsin. To date, eleven

Rick Reinhard

states have begun some form of statewide public school choice. (See the article, "Is Public School 'Choice' a Viable Alternative?" on page 21.)

• **Baltimore:** Eight public elementary and one middle school were taken over this fall by Education Alternatives Inc., a for-profit outfit based in Minneapolis. EAI is running the schools under a 5-year contract with the Baltimore City school district, and also runs one public school in Dade County, Fla. The schools, known as Tesseract schools, will receive the same per pupil financing as other Baltimore public schools. One of the key controversies has surrounded EAI's plans to replace existing paraprofessionals in the schools with "instructional interns." While the paraprofessionals receive wages averaging $10 an hour and benefits, the interns would be paid about $7 an hour without any benefits, according to *Education Week*. Critics also are concerned because art, music, and physical education teaching positions are being eliminated, and the number of special education classes are being cut.

Of related concern, Chapter One programs in five other Baltimore schools are being turned over to the Sylvan Learning Centers, a private company with franchised tutoring centers across the United States.

"From what we are seeing in Baltimore," says John Brown, president of the Baltimore City Teachers Association, "the education reform/pro-children rhetoric [of for-profit and voucher advocates] is just a smokescreen for getting at our public education dollars and our jobs."

Supporters of "choice" are also pressing their case in the courts. This June, lawsuits were filed in Chicago and Los Angeles calling for private-school tuition vouchers for the parents of low-income schoolchildren represented in the suit. The suits were filed by the Institute for Justice, a conservative, public-interest law firm based in Washington, D.C. The suits argue that parents should receive vouchers equal to the state money spent on local public schools because the quality of public schools in those cities violates state constitutional guarantees to educational opportunity. Clint Bolick, the attorney representing the Institute for Justice, said Chicago and Los Angeles were targeted in the voucher suits because both systems have "monumental" academic problems but strong private school systems.

In a number of cities, meanwhile, businesses and foundations are instituting private school voucher plans. In Milwaukee, for example, a private initiative known as PAVE is providing grants meeting half the tuition at a private or religious school, up to $1,000. PAVE, which stands for Partners Advancing Values in Education, is supported by some of the city's largest businesses. It received initial funding from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, one of the most prominent conservative foundations in the country which makes approximately $18 million in grants annually.

The Milwaukee program was modeled after a similar program in Indianapolis started by the Golden Rule Insurance Company. Privately funded voucher programs have also been instituted in Atlanta and the Little Rock area. □

Barbara Miner is managing editor of Rethinking Schools.

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Susan Lina Ruggles

'Choice' Will Devastate Our Urban Schools

By Maxine Waters

The American public school system is responsible for the education of approximately 90% of our nation's children. Therefore, the last thing this country can afford to do is to divert scarce resources from our already hurting public schools to fund private school education. That is what would happen under school "voucher" plans supported by the Bush Administration and other conservatives.

As states experience budgetary crises, we must decide and act on meaningful reforms that will enable our educational system to better respond to the needs of our young people. "Choice" is not a reform — it is an abandonment of American children and teachers who rely on our public system for education and job opportunities. Contrary to claims, the school choice proposal will be devastating for urban, minority, and poor students who desperately need quality education.

Private schools are not governed by federal, state, or community public policies. While some might wield this fact to support expanding choice to include private schools, such a move will simply amount to an open season on the hard-won civil rights gains our country has made in the last 30 years. Private schools, for instance, are free to discriminate — they may accept anyone by their own choosing, and you can be sure that those who will be rejected will be those students who require higher cost services such as special or remedial education.

The recently passed and widely acclaimed Americans with Disability Act, civil rights legislation, and laws governing the use of defamatory materials have no bearing on the functioning of private schools; and if students should misbehave, fail to perform adequately, or simply not fit the mold, no uniform standard shall regulate how their cases will be handled — opening the floodgates for preferential treatment.

Our taxpayers' dollars should not be used to support privately owned, elite academies. Neither should taxpayers support sectarian institutions or religious schools, as prohibited by our constitutional mandate separating church and state.

Tragically, at a time when our children need and deserve serious, thoughtful, and dramatic change, the best that "choice" advocates can do is offer a smokescreen that diverts attention and resources from our nation's poorest and "at-risk" students. ❑

Maxine Waters, a Democratic Congresswoman from Los Angeles, is a member of the Congressional Black Caucus and of the House Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee.

Our Schools Need Money, Not Rhetoric

An interview with C. J. Prentiss, State Representative

The following is condensed from an interview with C. J. Prentiss, a leading advocate in the Ohio House of Representatives for education reform. She was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools.

Some people are advocating private school choice as the solution to the crisis facing education in this country. Do you agree?

No. I think private school choice is a tactic to deflect attention from the government's responsibility to educate all children. Private school choice, on the face of it, would not accommodate all children. Second, it takes energy away from the real question: are we willing, as a government, to spend the money necessary to educate all our children? Third, it allows the government to dangle this carrot in front of desperate parents who are frustrated with the public school systems, while it pays lip service to educational reform.

What should be the focus of state legislators who are concerned about our schools?

There is no magic as to discovering what works. The jury is in. We know what works. My charge as a state legislator is clear. Too much money and attention are being placed on measuring performance outcomes. We need instead to shift the debate and money toward delivery standards. By this I mean the amount of resources and the quality of programs we are actually providing to all children. When I raise this issue of equity of such delivery standards, my colleagues on the Education Committee cry in unison, "C. J., that makes sense, but it costs too much money."

However, this does not deter me. I begin with the concept that we must have more adults working with children. For example, we need smaller class sizes so children receive the individual attention that they need.

We also need more social services for children and families. I would push for the concept of one-stop social services based at the school. It's just common sense. Why should a mother have to run around town to ten different agencies?

We need all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds. We need more support programs for parents. Too often, they don't have the foggiest idea how to help their child academically. They want to do what's best, but they don't always know what that means.

We need resources, everything from new buildings, to new science labs, computers, and textbooks.

None of these ideas is new. I hate to even use the word "reform" because these changes have been advocated for years. It's just that we have never been willing to fund them in a serious way. Sure we may have a pilot program or a collaborative effort here and there. But there has never been the overall, systemwide effort needed to make these reforms.

So when I hear somebody talking some nonsense about school choice, which will only deal with a select number of kids and will take money away from the public schools that are the only hope for some children, I say that is morally wrong.

The problem is, if we aren't committed to truly reforming our public schools, then support for private school choice will only escalate. People are frustrated with the public schools. In the Black community, in particular, there is this great sense of helplessness in terms of improving the schools.

Given the fiscal crisis facing many states, how do you convince legislators to allocate the money necessary for public school reform?

I point out the cost effectiveness of quality education. I use the slogan, and it's not new, "You either pay now or you pay later."

When you know that 40% of all pregnant teenagers are two-to-three grade levels behind, and that 80% of children in juvenile detention homes read at a fifth grade reading level or below, and that 60% of prison inmates are functionally illiterate, and that 90% of those on welfare have difficulty with the printed and written word, then you see the connection between success in school and success in life. ❐

Susan Lina Ruggles

C. J. Prentiss (D-Cleveland) is a member of the Ohio House of Representatives. She is on the following committees: Education; Health and Retirement; Commerce and Labor; and Urban Affairs. She chairs the Joint House and Senate Committee on Infant Mortality and Family Support, and has received the legislator of the year award.

'Choice' is a Smokescreen

An interview with Linda Darling-Hammond

The following is condensed from an interview with Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Teacher's College, Columbia University and co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Education. She was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools.

Some people argue that vouchers increase educational equity because they allow low-income children, especially children of color, to go to private schools. Do you think vouchers promote equity?

This issue is particularly poignant because those who are proposing private school choice are frequently the same people who have been opposing equal funding to schools for the last 20 years.

The real equity issue is that there are radically unequal allocations of funds to schools. These unequal allocations routinely disadvantage schools in central cities and in poor rural areas. Private school choice, as it is currently being proposed, is a smokescreen to avoid tackling this real equity issue.

If you allow people to "choose" schools, there are a number of limited slots in the well-funded schools worth choosing. So all you are doing is making a tiny adjustment in the allocation of educational opportunity for a very small number of children and still condemning a large number of children to poorly funded, inadequate schools.

While I am always in favor of something that helps any kid on the edge, choice is a marginal answer to the much bigger problem of our crumbling educational infrastructure.

I want infrastructural change, and I want it for central cities because they have been on the short end of the stick forever. That's first and foremost.

What do you mean by infrastructural change?

I mean changes such as equal and adequate allocation of dollars. I mean access to resources such as libraries, materials, and computers. I mean policies for recruiting teachers, for preparing them, for ensuring that there be enough well-qualified teachers in all subject areas. I mean policies that encourage good teaching and learning — many regulations, particularly in curriculum and testing, work against good education and discourage higher level thinking by requiring a fragmented, dumbed-down curriculum governed by multiple choice tests.

We have other fundamental problems. We pay teachers 25% less than college-educated workers in other occupations. We put lots of money into chains of bureaucracy and far fewer dollars actually get to the classroom than in other countries.

Of all the infrastructure problems, the single largest is the inadequate supply of good teachers. The single most damaging aspect of education in many central city schools is the radical inexperience and lack of expertise of many of the teachers. We routinely put the teachers with the least experience and training in the most troubled central city schools.

We need a federal policy that supports teacher preparation and training. We don't have enough qualified teachers in math and science, for example, and nobody acknowledges this. The shortage is such that one-third of American schools do not offer physics courses. They can't. They do not have the qualified teachers. And over one-third the mathematics and science teachers are not qualified to teach what they are teaching. We hire whomever we can, or we ask teachers to teach out of their field. For instance, when there was a glut of physical education and home economics teachers, many were moved to teach biology and math.

We have had this chronic shortage for almost 40 years. We have done nothing to solve that. In fact, President Reagan got rid of some of the scholarship and loan programs, along with the Urban Teachers Corps, which were designed to address this problem. The disappearance of these programs has also contributed to a growing shortage of teachers of color, who are often most committed to working in central city schools and who are needed in all schools as valuable role models.

Until we deal with these infrastructure problems, we are never going to be able to educate children well. ☐

Rick Reinhard

The Debate Is About Privatization, not 'Choice'

An interview with Deborah Meier

The following is condensed from an interview with Deborah Meier, founder and director of Central Park East in District 4 in New York City. District 4 has a long-standing public school choice plan. Meier was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools.

You have been associated with the concept of school choice. How does your view of choice differ from that of President Bush?

There are two unrelated perspectives, and they both use the word choice. When Bush and other conservatives talk about choice, they mean that private enterprise and the marketplace are better and that public institutions are, by their nature, inferior.

We need to dismiss the idea that the concept of choice has anything to do with Bush's proposals. He's not talking about choice at all. He's talking about privatization and a means to get rid of public education.

If we don't watch out, the word choice will mean only what Bush wants it to mean.

What do you mean by school choice?

When I've argued for choice, it has had nothing to do with abandoning public education. It has been a way to argue against the factory model of education. It has been a way to create more diverse and coherent educational communities. It has been a strategy for invention and innovation.

There are many places in this country where choice means giving families wider choices among public schools. The only thing it doesn't do is give them money in order to go to private schools.

Here in District 4 in East Harlem, we have used choice to create more and varied public schools during the last 20 years or so. We now have 52 elementary and junior high schools which replaced 20 former schools. And we offer parents in the district the chance to go to any of these 52 schools.

The largest school has 300 students and the smallest has 50. Some have different styles or focuses. In some, they have more music, or a lot more science. In some it's just a difference in how they organize the school day.

In Manhattan, virtually every district is moving in this direction — taking the same buildings and dividing them into smaller, more cohesive schools where people are there by choice. Part of what motivates these plans is the unfortunately new understanding that small schools are better. It is an enormously sad and almost criminal fact of American schools that we got enamored of large schools.

At the same time, choice does not solve the problem of equity. We have had problems of inequity in all sorts of schools. People who are not concerned with equity will use choice inequitably.

Why should we have a public education system in this country? What are the advantages?

The concept of public education rests on an assumption that the way we educate our youth is connected to the collective future we hope for. There isn't a more important decision in a democracy than the kind of education we want for all our children. If, for example, we believe that children have a better future if they meet kids from different backgrounds, then a certain policy follows from that belief.

The presumed advantage of the marketplace is that you don't think about anyone else when you make decisions. Under a marketplace approach to schools, the only people who have a voice is parents. The idea is that somehow through parents making the individual decision of what's best for their child, we will get what is best for society.

Unfortunately, you can find numerous examples of other parts of society that are privatized and where individuals can make private choices — such as medical care and hospitals — and these institutions are as corrupt and bureaucratic as schools.

I don't see any reason to assume that democracy and the needs of the larger society will be served by substituting collective decision-making with private, individual decision-making. And I'm taking it for granted that America wants to maintain a democracy. □

Choice does not solve the problem of equity. People who are not concerned with equity will use choice inequitably.

Rick Reinhard

Playing Politics with 'Choice'

By Gary Orfield

Choice is a term that is difficult to disagree with in principle, but which has no clear meaning until many blanks are filled in. In other words, it is an almost perfect political concept.

When asked whether they favored allowing choice within their district, 65% of public school parents said "yes" in a 1990 Gallup survey. Many who support choice in the abstract, however, may want a common core of educational requirements, no subsidies for religious education, maintenance of locally-based schools in their areas, enforcement of civil rights and handicapped rights in all schools receiving public funds, etc. Many who oppose increasing taxes to pay for transportation would also oppose limiting access to schools for students who cannot afford to pay for transportation. Cheap choice plans, with little provision for equalizing information among parents and providing transportation, are likely to intensify rather than diminish inequality and racial segregation among schools, and could leave disadvantaged students in even more inadequate and isolated schools.

The Bush plan promises large impacts because the market mechanism is expected to force improvements, as parents leave weak schools and choose better ones. The argument should be very familiar because it is the deregulation argument that dominated the 1980s. Deregulation of the savings and loan industry, cable television, airlines, telephone systems, and other institutions was expected to produce huge gains in efficiency and service. There have been successes in some areas but also some spectacular failures.

Choice plans are likely to intensify rather than diminish inequality and racial segregation.

The S & L crisis is already the most costly financial disaster in American history. It shows that many business leaders, freed of bureaucratic control, decided to speculate recklessly with other people's money. The airline experiment has reached a point of diminishing competition, virtual regional monopolies, deteriorated service, less convenient schedules for many travelers, strong efforts to distort markets with frequent traveler awards, proprietary reservation systems, predatory local pricing, and other market distortions. Congress has conceded the failure of cable TV deregulation and authorized re-regulation. The romance of the self-regulating marketplace has dimmed considerably.

The school choice debate usually ignores the other major policy areas in which a choice approach has long been dominant and where the Bush Administration is asking for more regulation. Among policies serving the poor, two of the most important are the Medicaid program, which allows people to choose doctors in the free market, and the Pell Grant and Guaranteed Student Loan programs, which enable students to choose colleges and other postsecondary education they would otherwise be unable to afford. These are multi-billion dollar programs based on choice and "self-regulating markets."

If Medicaid made the market work for low-income black residents of the South Side of Chicago, the quality of health care should have soared as doctors and clinics rushed in to compete for the hundreds of millions of dollars of business. Just the opposite has happened. Medical practitioners have not rushed into the area and many refuse Medicaid patients. Many hospitals and clinics have gone bankrupt and shut their doors, including the city's only black-controlled hospital. Far from efficient, low-cost service, much of the treatment is extremely expensive, highly inefficient, and very inconvenient emergency room treatment of conditions neglected much too long. The system has been far more expensive than predicted, has left tremendous inequalities in place, and has produced a strikingly inferior level of care by decaying institutions. In response, Bush is proposing *more* cost and service regulations.

Pell Grant and student loan experiences are similar. The grants and loans surely helped low-income students to enter college and other forms of training, but they were never able to make access equal for lower-income students. The grants were never set at high enough amounts to permit a full range of choices. Over time, as tuition soared and grants increased less rapidly, the program became more and more limited and, by the mid-1980s, the gains of the previous period were substantially lost.

In other words, there is nothing about a choice plan that can really control the cost of the institutions chosen among, or which can guarantee that government will provide a level of resources from year to year that enables real choices to be possible. Costs are, by definition, outside government's control while voucher levels are determined not by need, but by political compromise.

There is nothing in a choice system to assure either a full supply of choices at the right price or the level of support needed to make real choices available. ❐

Gary Orfield is a professor of political science and education at Harvard University. *This article is excerpted from* Voices from the Field: 30 Expert Opinions on "America 2000," The Bush Administration Strategy to "Reinvent" America's Schools, *funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.*

A Battle for the Soul of Public Education

By Warren Furutani

When we talk about choice in California, we are talking about a mortal battle for the fundamental soul of public education in a democratic society. That is what the fight is about.

It is no coincidence that funding for public education is receding as our school districts become more populated by children of color. It is no coincidence that dollars are being pulled from our underfunded, overburdened school system at the same time our governor and the President of this nation are pushing vouchers and choice as an alternative for the middle class in education. What took place in California will take place in your state as well.

It is clear that vouchers and choice will be a vehicle for those who have the mobility and the additional dollars to go to the private sector — while at the same time guaranteeing that those who can't augment that voucher will then be relegated to an underfunded, overburdened system. And it will be a system that has been deserted by the middle class, deserted by those who think they are getting better for their own but who in fact are eliminating one of the most fundamental democratic institutions in our country, which is public education.

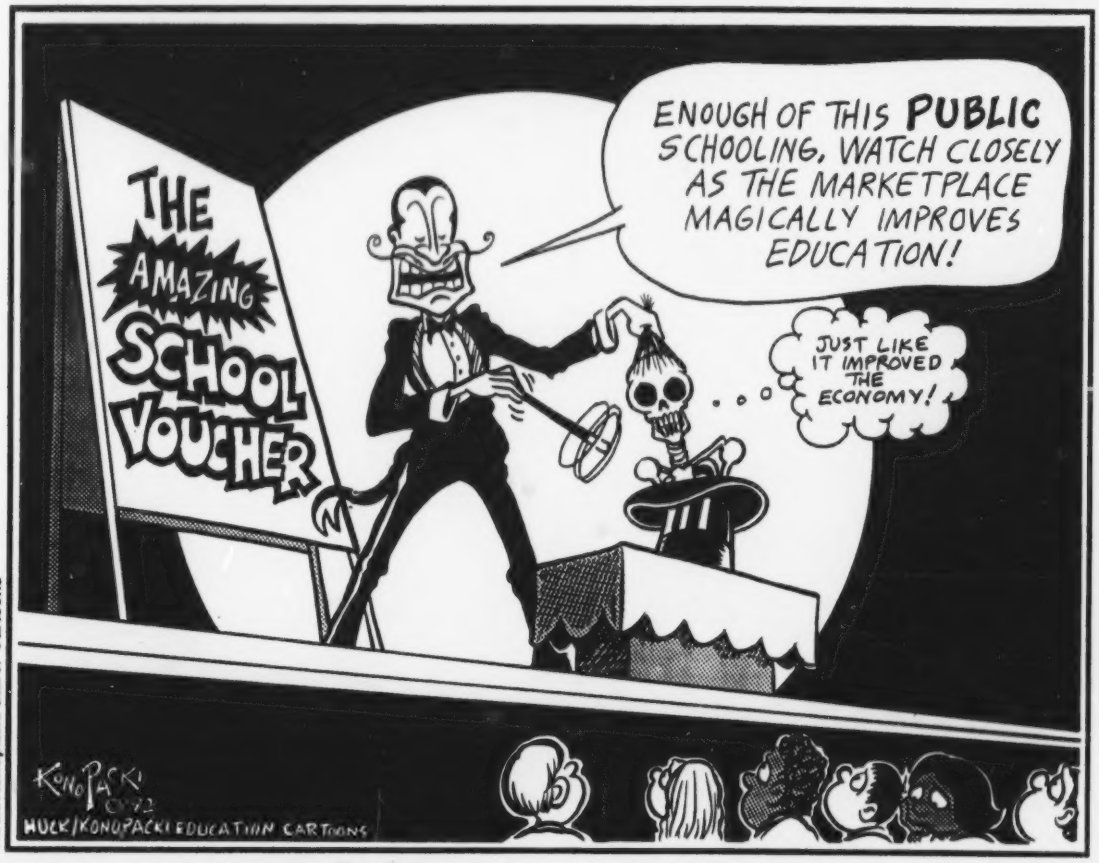
As administrators and school boards in urban districts are, like their students, increasingly people of color — and as people of color become more of a force in our urban centers — we find that those who sit in seats of state and federal power are trying to pull away the middle class. They are deserting public education. As a result, those who are left behind, those with special needs, special challenges, different languages, those whom we've been failing for generations, will be relegated to the back seat of society for the rest of their lives.

We cannot accept that. ❐

Susan Lina Ruggles

It is no coincidence that funding for public education is receding as our school districts become more populated by children of color.

Warren Furutani is a member (and past president) of the Los Angeles City Board of Education. The above is adapted from a speech before the National Education Association Conference on Women and Minorities in June 1992.


THE AMAZING SCHOOL VOUCHER
ENOUGH OF THIS PUBLIC SCHOOLING, WATCH CLOSELY AS THE MARKETPLACE MAGICALLY IMPROVES EDUCATION!
JUST LIKE IT IMPROVED THE ECONOMY!
KONOPACKI '92
HUCK/KONOPACKI EDUCATION CARTOONS

Huck/Konopacki Labor Cartoons

Questions and Answers about School Choice

Following are answers to some of the most common questions about school "choice." The article is based on discussion among members of the Rethinking Schools *editorial board and contributing editors of this special edition.*

When people talk about school "choice" what do they mean?

At this point, people generally are talking about voucher plans that funnel public dollars into non-public schools, either through direct payments or tax credits. At issue is the attempt to siphon dollars away from public schools and to privatize education.

Interestingly, the word "choice" wasn't used in connection with schools until the controversy over desegregation. Throughout the South, so-called Freedom of Choice plans limited desegregation by putting the burden on African-American students to provide transportation for themselves, to transfer to schools that were majority white, to figure out when to apply, and so forth. In essence, these public school "choice" plans were outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1968.

In recent years, private school "choice" has become explicitly linked to an assault on schools as public institutions. Some advocates of private "choice," like Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, have called for scrapping the entire public school system.

What about plans that allow parents to choose among public schools?

A lot depends on the program. If protections aren't built in, public school "choice" has some of the same problems as private school "choice." Some plans, for example, set up specialty or "magnet" schools that become havens for middle-class students. These schools often get more resources, or have entrance criteria, or attract parents who know how to work the system.

It's important to look at what parents really want in a school. Above all, they want a quality school with a safe environment that encourages learning. Magnet or specialty schools tend to offer such an environment. They also show that public schools can work if they are

given sufficient resources and are properly structured.

At the same time, children learn in different ways and school communities can be built around a certain philosophy or emphasis— such as schools that emphasize music, or math, or a Montessori or whole language teaching philosophy.

Even under a well-structured public school plan, however, "choice" is not a panacea. It must be part of a broader reform strategy that includes such changes as better teacher training, a multicultural, anti-racist curriculum, and more resources. The key is ensuring standards and equity for all schools and all children.

Because public schools are a monopoly, they don't have to worry about competition. Wouldn't "choice" force public schools to be more innovative?

The notion that competition will engender quality ignores that there are deep race and class divisions in society. The reality is, there are different markets for different people based on how much money they have.

Even though Cadillac and Mercedez Benz dealers may compete against each other, they don't compete with Ford Festiva or Yugo dealers. The quality of the car you buy depends on how much money you have, not on the inherent benefits of competition. You also see any number of low quality products that stay on the market — from plastic tennis shoes to pre-fab, cardboard homes — because they are all that some people can afford.

It's also important to remember that competition in business depends heavily on advertising and cutting costs. Do we really want our schools to follow the lead of business and cut costs to the bone, perhaps by getting rid of "extras" such as libraries or music and art rooms? Or mimic corporate advertising, by spending precious dollars on public relations efforts?

Most important, talking about public schools as a monopoly misses the point. The reason we have public schools is because education is a public responsibility that is essential to building a democratic society. People need to develop skills and common democratic values in order to participate reasonably and critically in civic life. Our schools are forging the future of our democracy, not just the future of individual doctors and scientists.

Unions are some of the strongest opponents of private school "choice," and they are opposed because they fear losing their power and membership. Isn't the union position self-serving?

It's easy for proponents of "choice" to continually claim that teachers and unions are only interested in themselves. It's more difficult to answer their criticisms.

Trade unions do have the right to oppose attempts to turn services over to non-union workers. And given the attacks on unions in recent years, both by the government and by businesses, teacher unions have legitimate fears.

In Milwaukee, for example, the teachers in the community-based and religious schools are paid a lot less and have fewer benefits than public school teachers. If you had a significant expansion of voucher schools, you would see a lot more small, non-union shops. You would see less well-trained teachers and there would be a higher turnover. And that would influence the quality of education.

Undoubtedly, some union officials and teachers are motivated by self-interest. And it is incumbent upon progressive teachers to work within their unions and to push them beyond narrow trade union concerns.

But many teachers honestly question whether the marketplace will magically lead to quality. Among them are educators who continuously work passionately to improve schools and advance the opportunities of their students. They worry what will happen when the seats are filled up in the private schools and there are still millions of children left to attend a public school system depleted of resources.

Don't parents have a right to choose a school that they feel coincides with their value system?

Parents have the right to choose any school they want — but they don't have the right to expect that the taxpayer will necessarily pay for that school.

The more important issue is that parents — and taxpayers — have not only the right but the responsibility to become involved in the public schools. And this needs to take place in the broader context of fighting for a better education for all kids. Are we going to continue the individualistic self-centeredness of the 1980s and allow a few parents to make individual choices with little regard for the public good? Or are we going to fight collectively, as parents and taxpayers, for a better educational system for all?

We must balance the rights of parents against the rights of society as a whole. Parental rights, for example, do not mean that schools with discriminatory policies should receive public funds. Or that public money should go to religious schools.

Many religious schools have a strong track record on educating kids. What is so bad about opening up the voucher program to religious schools?

The most fundamental reason is that our Constitution, for very good reasons, mandates a separation between church and state. If you're a Christian, it's easy to forget that there are many other faiths in this country.

The core issue is that individuals would be paying tax money to support schools with religious values that might be antagonistic to their own religious values. Religion is a profoundly private matter and should remain that way.

Why has the idea of private school "choice" become so popular in recent years?

First, there is legitimate dissatisfaction with the failures of the public schools. In urban areas, in particular, far too many schools are failing the needs of our children.

Second, there has been a conservative counterrevolution against public services generally.

continued on next page

Rick Reinhard

The solution to society's problems is posed in terms of the marketplace, and privatization plans are cropping up all over the place. On an individual level, this counter-revolution has encouraged people to look out for themselves with little regard for others.

Third, we have to consider whether there is a relationship between the government's willingness to abandon urban schools and the fact that urban schools are increasingly populated by African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans.

Fourth, it's important to look at how businesses and wealthier individuals can directly profit from privatizing education. Since most voucher plans pay far less than the per pupil cost of schools, taxes might decrease in some districts. At the same time, middle-class parents who are already sending their children to private schools will get government aid to help pay the tuition. Finally, some businesses hope to make money by setting up private schools or getting contracts for different educational services. Schools are one place where businesses aren't making as much money as they might want.

Doesn't private school "choice" allow lower-income families to send their kids to private schools — and therefore isn't it a move toward more equality?

In the long run, abandoning public education will only increase inequalities in education. A select few low-income families might benefit from voucher plans, but most poor people would still go to public schools — and these schools would have fewer resources because taxpayers' money would be going into private schools.

If voucher supporters really wanted to promote equity, then they would give $10,000 to each child to attend the school of their choice. And they would force private schools to accept all students who apply, based on a lottery system. But there's no "choice" plan anywhere in the country that offers adequate money or safeguards against discrimination.

Bureaucracy acts like a sledgehammer and beats the life out of schools. Wouldn't "choice" help break this bureaucracy?

We must reduce bureaucracy in our schools, there's no doubt about it. Developments toward site-based management and grassroots control of schools are a healthy step in that direction.

But we can't make bureaucracy into a scapegoat for all our problems. There are good schools within large, bureaucratic school systems, and there are bad private schools that are free of bureaucratic oversight.

People also forget that there are enormous bureaucratic structures in the corporate world and that the Catholic Church, which runs many schools, is highly bureaucratic. All complicated organizations require a certain amount of bureaucracy.

Some bureaucratic regulations are also hard-won protections helping to guarantee equity around bilingual education, affirmative action, and education for the physically challenged. It would be a step backward if such regulations were thrown out or ignored.

If you're opposed to private school "choice," what's your alternative vision for improving the schools?

There's no one simple answer, but one can outline the elements of meaningful reform. We must restructure our schools so parents and teachers have more say. We must overhaul our curriculum to promote critical thinking and a multicultural, anti-racist perspective. We must demand racial and gender equity. We must eliminate tracking. We must change our testing and assessment so we assess thinking and learning, not just how well one answers multiple choice questions out of context. We must improve the quality of teacher training and have smaller class sizes. On a state level we should equalize funding for school districts. On a federal level, we need to substantially increase our funding for education. The bottom line is our schools need more resources.

Many of these reforms will cost a lot of money. Schools haven't shown they wisely use the money they already have. How can we be sure we're not throwing good money after bad?

The issue of money needs to be put in perspective. Most important, one needs to look at the amount of dollars being put into urban public schools versus suburban schools. And you will see vast inequities. In Wisconsin, for example, the suburban school district of Nicolet budgets $12,000 per year per student, while the Milwaukee public schools budget $6,600 per year.

You also need to look at the amount of money that's spent on a child not only in school, but in the family. You would find that in those suburban communities where more money is spent on public education, there is generally more money spent on the kids in their private family life, whether it's for computers, or vacations, or summer camps, or private tutors, or sports programs. One reason those kids are succeeding is that there are a lot more resources spent on them.

If we were a truly democratic society, we would have a financial affirmative action program for poor kids. In other words, we would spend more money on their schools, relative to the amount spent on suburban schools. Our overriding concern must be providing a quality education to all children. School "choice," on the other hand, fosters more privileges for the already privileged. ❐

Whittle's Raid on Public Education

By Jonathan Kozol

A "growing bunch of entrepreneurs," *The New York Times* reported in a 1991 education supplement, "are suggesting that unabashed capitalism can succeed" in the delivery of education "where bureaucracy and altruism have failed." If private corporations can achieve what government cannot, the *Times* went on, "why should they not make money in the process?"

A number of corporations are now setting out to do exactly that. Burger King has opened "Burger King Academies," fully accredited quasi-private high schools, in 14 cities. IBM and Apple are contemplating the idea of starting schools-for-profit, too. Educational Alternatives, a profit-making firm in Minneapolis now runs a public school for profit in Miami, under contract to Dade County, and recently won contracts to run public schools in Baltimore and Duluth. "It's open season on marketing," says the corporation's president.

But the most ambitious plan to date for profit-making schools are those announced in May 1991 by Chris Whittle, founder and chairman of Whittle Communications, a publisher of upscale, consumer-oriented magazines. Whittle has pioneered already in the sale of television news — and advertising packages — to public schools. Now, "the impresario of captive-audience marketing," as *The New York Times* describes him, plans to open 200 profit-making schools by 1996 and foresees as many as 1,000 schools serving 2 million children within another decade. Although Whittle is the front man, the media conglomerate Time Warner holds 38% of the stock in the Edison Project, as the venture is called, and has an option to obtain another 30%. Another one-quarter of the stock is held by a British tabloid publisher, Associated Newspapers.

Whittle's commercials for Snickers, Burger King and other products on Channel One, shown in 10,000 schools, are required viewing for almost 8 million students daily — more than a third of all teenagers in the nation's schools. *U.S. News and World Report* notes that Whittle is tapping "the potential for widespread commercial penetration" of a student market in which more than $80 billion worth of products are sold yearly. At $157,000 for a 30-second ad — double the advertising rate of prime-time network news — Whittle grosses $630,000 from the four ads run each day, bringing him gross annual revenues of more than $100 million.

It is easy to see why advertisers are prepared to pay these rates. Under the contract that school districts sign, 90% of the children in a school must watch the program 90% of the time, each of the programs must be watched in its entirety, a show cannot be interrupted, and the teacher does not have the right to turn it off.

Whittle's Edison Project — which, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, he intends to use as "an expanded outlet" for advertisements — carries all of this a great deal further. The schools will charge tuition of $5,500 — roughly the same as the national average spent per pupil in the public schools. In order to cut costs, Whittle proposes saving on teacher salaries by using volunteers, classroom aides and computerized instruction, and he proposes using the students themselves to do some of the work of school custodians. Twenty percent of students will be granted scholarships, although the kids on scholarships will, for the most part, be in separate schools from those who pay. In an inner-city school, he says 95% of the kids will be on scholarship, while in suburban settings only 1% may be on scholarship. Whittle appears untroubled by the certainty that he is thereby guaranteeing segregated schooling.

Although Whittle promises he will not be selective in admissions, he does not address the likelihood that those who seek and win admission to his schools will be self-selecting. His promise, furthermore, is one he may well circumvent by simple strategies like opting not to offer services for kids with special needs.

Whittle's agenda meshes nicely with the voucher program advocated by the Bush Administration in its

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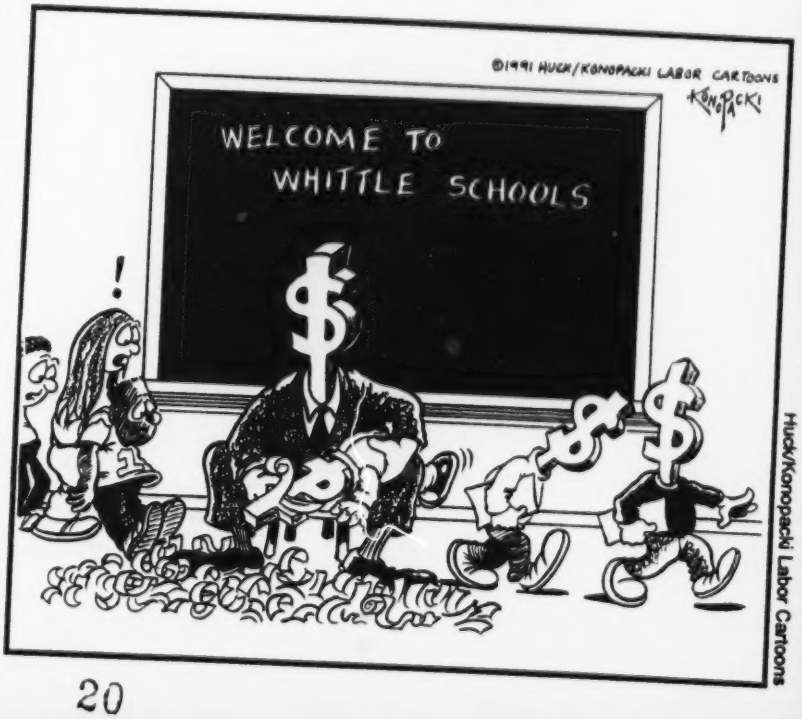

Susan Lina Ruggles

education plan, "America 2000." Whittle's ties to Lamar Alexander, Bush's Education Secretary, have already been explored by journalists. Alexander, a friend of Whittle's for some 20 years, initially served on Whittle's board and also worked as a consultant to, and held stock in, his corporation - a relationship from which he profited financially. (Having bought four Whittle Communications shares in 1988 for $10,000, Alexander and his wife then sold them back to Whittle for $330,000 five months later — a transaction that attracted only brief attention from the Senate during Alexander's confirmation hearings.)

Whittle's White House connections were rendered even more explicit when he hired longtime Bush and Reagan operative Chester Finn, Jr. to serve as his adviser. Finn, according to *The Boston Globe*, is being paid $1 million on a three-year Whittle contract. Finn, of course, is also close to Alexander and is generally acknowledged to be the author of "America 2000." Whittle's announcement of the Edison Project, moreover, followed the release of "America 2000" by a mere five weeks. While Bush, with the help of Finn, was arguing the virtues of the voucher system, which would open up the schooling market to the private sector, Whittle — also helped by Finn — was staking out his first claim on that market.

Benno Schmidt, the former president of Yale whom Whittle recruited to head the Edison Project, denies that he and Whittle are adversaries of the public schools. Schmidt insists that his purpose is to offer a challenge and a model that can only help public schools. But Whittle himself, in a careless moment, made his real intentions all too clear. "You have to have a West Berlin for East Berlin to fall," he told *The New York Times*, "and what we're really doing here is building West Berlin." This fascinating metaphor, in which he likens the American common school to the collapsing Stalinist monstrosity of East Berlin, is consistent with the language used by many voucher advocates. John Chubb, a proponent of vouchers who, like Finn, has now been added to the Whittle payroll, stated a few years ago that what he is proposing "is as different from our present system as capitalism is from socialism." Chubb, who now appears with regularity on network television, makes explicit his distaste for public schools, which he describes as "captives" of democracy.

Once a handful of Whittle's schools exist — and, with the corporate funds he has available, the first schools he opens are likely to be dazzling creations — they may well be exploited as a further selling point for vouchers. Parents, he says, who already "pay tax dollars" for the public schools, "are going to have to make a decision about whether they want to pay twice." Whittle undoubtedly hopes that the parents of the children he enrolls — and the favorable press he orchestrates — will generate a national demand for the diversion of tax money into private education.

He has, moreover, shown already that he is prepared to pour enormous sums of money into lobbying campaigns. In California, where there has been strong resistance to his television package, Whittle has spent some $640,000 to recruit high-powered legislative lobbyists. How much might he someday spend to lobby Congress for a voucher system? The question, in a sense, is academic; Finn and Chubb and Schmidt are, in effect, his lobbyists already.

Under the entrepreneurial model Whittle represents, public schools will of course be obliged to advertise in order to compete with Whittle's marketing, causing a diversion of scarce funds from teaching into selling. This is, moreover, a competition that public educators, having neither marketing experience nor capital, are unlikely to win. With public education starved for funds after a decade of Reaganite attrition and with many public schools in disrepair, Whittle's initial boutique offerings are likely to appear spectacular.

If the goals of Chubb and Finn and Whittle should be realized, what might education someday look like in America? A vivid answer is given by Chubb, who is now one of the seven members of the Edison design team. Public schools, he has written, "must take whoever walks in the door." As a result, "they do not have the luxury of being able to select" the students who may be "best suited" to their goals. A private school, by contrast, has the right to keep out students who may need "more slowly paced instruction." Under a voucher system, he says, instead of public schools that try to serve a large diversity of students in one setting, we would see "a constellation" of "different schools serving different kinds of students differently." Such schools, he suggests, "might target their appeals" to "chosen segments" of the population.

Excellence in public schools, says Chubb, is undermined because so "many of their students come from families that put little or no emphasis on education." The virtue of the voucher-funded schools that he proposes, Chubb asserts, is that, like private schools today, they would be attractive to the kinds of kids whose parents are "informed," "supportive" and "encourage education." Children of the other kind of parents -

"parents who may cause problems" - are, he says, "the ones most likely to drop out." What would happen to these children? "Larger numbers of ... specialized schools," he claims, would soon emerge and would presumably address the needs of children from such families. Strip away the fancy language here and we are looking at social Darwinist scenario, a triage operation that will filter off the fortunate and leave the rest in schools where children of the "better" parents do not need to see them.

Unlike his new employer, Chubb is honest to a fault. If his goals should someday be achieved, what we have known as public education will be granted a new definition and a different role in our society. What is now regarded as a right will come to be seen as just one more commercial product — or, more properly, a line of differentiated products. Whatever common bonds still hold together cities and communities are likely to be weakened or dissolved. As parents scramble to get children into one of Whittle's schools — or, for that matter, any other "voucher school" — they will, by necessity, view almost every other parent as a rival. They will feel no obligation to raise tax-support for public schools attended by their neighbors' children. Instead of fighting for systematic excellence and equity for all, we will have taught them to advance their own kids at whatever cost to other people's children.

To the extent that liberal education writers have demurred at Whittle's plans, they have focused chiefly on the dangers of commercialism in the classroom. But the commercial products Whittle sells may be far less pernicious than his non-commercial products: an attitude, a set of values, a body of political beliefs as well. Whittle disclaims any wish to sell his ideologies to children. He speaks of education as a strictly neutral and mechanical experience. As every teacher knows, however, schools are never neutral. Consciously or not, they shape the soul and style of the future adult population.

When business enters education, therefore, it sells something more important than the brand names of its products. It sells a way of looking at the world and at oneself.

Ironically, the road that leads to Whittle's enterprise may have been paved to a degree by liberals who have supported the idea of market choice and competition in the public schools while reassuring us that we can ward off any threat of private-school vouchers. In effect, they have been saying: "It will go thus far — and no farther."

I see no reason why. Once we accept the ideology of competition as the engine of reform, we will be hard-pressed to say why only certain people ought to be allowed to be competitors. If "parental option" is to be the pedagogic gospel, who is to say which options are to be permitted and which will be disallowed? Already ideologues at places like the Heritage Foundation are making just this argument: If choice is good, who are you to draw the line at choices only you approve of? Right-wing intellectuals who make this point are better debaters than most educators on the left; they are also infinitely more successful at encapsulating their ideas and selling them to politicians and the public. They shrewdly see the drive for public schools of choice as an initial thrust — inadequate but tolerable for now — in a campaign that will eventuate in an unfettered market system.

Old friends of mine in the "alternative schools" tell me with some confidence: "We're not afraid of people such as Whittle. We have something special here that he can't duplicate." I don't think they understand the forces they are facing. No matter what the "special" thing they do, they cannot do it with the flair and promotional momentum that a massive private company can generate; nor can they profit from the same economies of scale. Business can and will construct dramatic new school buildings, set up space-age science and computer centers, target specific clienteles. Anything, moreover, that progressives have that is unique can be appropriated (even if adulterated) and repackaged to look better in commercial form. Their pedagogy, where it seems of interest to the public, can be copied and reprocessed to provide a Whittle school with a soupcon of liberal inventiveness and charm. Their teachers can be weaned away by better salaries. Their administrators can be bought away as well. Business can also mouth the words of people like Paul Goodman, Paulo Freire, and John Holt as frequently as we do.

Whittle's enterprise, moreover, may be only the beginning. With the end of the cold war and the scaling back of military spending, military-industrial companies like Honeywell and Raytheon may well shift their horizons soon and start to look at education as an even better realm than war for future "penetration." An education-industrial complex cannot fail to represent a tempting prospect.

Those who dismiss this danger ought to listen to the statements made by business strategists and by their friends in power. "It is time," says Deputy Education Secretary David Kearns, the former CEO of Xerox, for business "to take ownership of the schools." We would do well to take him at his word. A victory by Governor Clinton in November may postpone the arrival of this train, but it will not derail it. Whittle has shown his business friends how easily resistance on the part of local citizens can be defeated by a mix of doublespeak and savvy. Any man who, in a mere three years, has won the power to indoctrinate eight million kids with advertising every day is likely to do very well at breaking open the next market.

"A radical reprivatizing of the public realm is now well underway," notes Pennsylvania State University Professor Henry Giroux. Strategists at corporate think tanks are already mobilizing their resources for the next encounter. If we are serious, we should be mobilizing too. ❐

Jonathan Kozol is the author of Savage Inequalities *and other books on education. This article is condensed from "Whittle and the Privateers," which appeared in the Sept. 21, 1992 issue of* The Nation.

Chris Whittle's Trojan Horse

By Anthony J. Alvarado

The Edison Project! Like a latter-day Thomas Alva Edison, inventor of the incandescent bulb, a team headed by departing Yale president Benno Schmidt and Whittle Communications chairman Chris Whittle promises to illuminate the educational landscape of America by developing a blueprint for a franchised, profit-making national school system educating two million children in 1,000 schools. Whittle and Schmidt say they can deliver significantly improved education to a representative group of American students at no more than the average current per-pupil expenditure.

Yet lurking in the shadows of this project are unspoken assumptions and negative incentives that will inexorably create a dangerously undemocratic private school system, while eroding the character and resources of U.S. public education. This threat is real enough to warrant not only a skeptical eye, but concerted opposition to the public-policy initiatives and the private-sector supports the Edison Project will require.

Business is hardly the long-awaited messiah. The financial pages are replete with stories of red ink, budget cuts, plant closings and product recalls.

Whittle Communications' present venture in schools, Channel One, is a 12-minute current events program replete with jean commercials. The program appears to be a business success yet an educational flop. No independent researcher or thoughtful commentator has ever claimed Channel One contributes to the kind of learning educational reformers are demanding — teaching students to use their minds, solve complex problems, and use their imaginations creatively. What Channel One teaches is that there is money to be made in schools without necessarily improving the quality of education. The hucksters are out to prove P.T. Barnum's aphorism: "There's a sucker born every minute."

In truth, the dollars needed to operate a chain of private schools, much less to make a profit, are simply not there. Today private schools, charging significantly more, and parochial schools, charging less, are struggling to survive. For them there are no profits. Whittle's business plan, despite his protestations, has to count on eventual public subsidy through vouchers or tax incentives. Several members of his team, and Whittle's friend, Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, have been promoting private-school voucher schemes. It doesn't take a crystal ball to predict that Whittle principals, plans, and prototypes will be used increasingly to lobby for public funds.

Financial realities will make it impossible to serve student populations similar to those in the public schools, contrary to Whittle's claims. The poorer the student, the fewer dollars he or she brings to the school, and the more at-risk the student, the more difficult and costly the education. The incentive to maximize profits is inherently at odds with the social responsibility borne by the public schools to educate such students. The pressures of the marketplace will force the project to select those students who can pay, or to choose, subtly, those poor students who can succeed.

Deepening the wedge between the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged, between rich and poor, between whites and people of color, is contrary to the American dream. Inventing a system for the best and ignoring the rest rends the social and cultural fabric in a nation struggling to fashion a new *e pluribus unum.*

Public education has been so criticized over the last decade that many people will buy the argument that business can save our schools. Our society needs to be reminded that the private sector is heavily implicated in the present morass in education. The business sector publishes our textbooks, constructs our tests, and supplies our condoms.

The Edison Project is not the proverbial breath of fresh air in a bureaucratic educational mausoleum, and business is hardly the long-awaited messiah. The financial pages are replete with stories of hemorrhaging red ink, cuts in research and development budgets, excessive executive compensation, plant closings and product recalls. It is preposterous to believe that profits can revolutionize American education....

To reform our educational system, we must harness U.S. ingenuity not for profit, but for excellence and equity. Managing for the short-term bottom line may satisfy investors, but will it guarantee a more literate and informed citizenry? Dispensing technological potions to starving school systems for public use and to gullible parents for home consumption will keep marketers and advertisers gainfully employed, but will it produce a skilled workforce for American industry? Are franchised, Socratic soundbites a viable substitute for thoughtful Socratic dialogues?

Caveat emptor, America! ❐

Anthony J. Alvadrado is Superintendent of Community School District Two in New York City. This article originally appeared in the July 13, 1992 edition of New York Newsday.

Is Public School 'Choice' a Viable Alternative?

By Ann Bastian

Being asked to write an article against school choice is a bit like being asked to burn the American flag at a VFW meeting. You have every right to do it, but do you want to? After all, choice is a bedrock American value. Applied to schools, it sounds great: students and parents get to choose, deserving schools get chosen.

But what if this is not the reality of school choice? In reality, school choice means very different things in different contexts. From the many versions of choice, we can construct three broad categories.

First, there are choice programs within a single public school district. These local, "controlled choice" plans seek to expand educational options.

Second, there are interdistrict and statewide public school plans. These seek to establish a public marketplace of schools through competition for enrollment.

Third, there are voucher plans that include private schools. These seek to create an unrestricted marketplace of competing public, private, and parochial schools.

Much of the debate over school choice has focused on vouchers. It is, after all, the key educational platform of the Bush Administration. Vouchers deserve the most critical scrutiny as a threat to public education. But we should also look closely at the problems and potentials of choice programs that are strictly within the public schools.

The most promising examples of choice have occurred in the first category, within single public school districts. The programs most often cited are East Harlem in New York City, Montclair, N.J., and Cambridge, Mass. These programs, while not perfect, suggest several important features of a good choice model:

- Choice is just one element in a comprehensive reform strategy.
- Every school in the district has become a school of choice.
- School missions are diverse, but have been developed in complementary rather than competitive ways.
- Teachers are given the time, training, and power to shape the school mission; parents also have a strong voice.
- Transportation costs are covered by the district.
- Parents and students are given enough information to make informed choices.

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Susan Lina Runnels

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• Districts have secured significantly higher funding to sustain school improvement.

We should be fully aware, however, that even within a single public school district, controlled choice is no miracle cure for education. Where it works, it is one tool among others, and it only works well when there is a prior and steadfast commitment to equity, adequate funding, and internal school restructuring.

School districts should be particularly cautious about choice programs that improve only a limited number of schools. This is often the case in "magnet" programs where students apply to "specialty" schools that receive extra resources and funding. When there are not enough good schools to go around, choice is more likely to create islands of excellence (or adequacy) than it is to stimulate improvement across the board.

We can see the stark result when we look at America's urban high school systems, where flagship academic magnet schools serving middle class students contrast with desperately deprived neighborhood high schools for the working class and poor.

The same problems are posed by charter schools, which are special, privately run schools under contract with school boards. Like magnets, charter schools are promoted as models for innovations, but in the context of fiscal crisis and polarized resources, they are more likely to end up as isolated refuges for the lucky, the adamant, and by design, the privileged.

Unless our commitment to quality includes all schools, we are building more lifeboats, not better ships. The challenges for school choice are compounded in the second category, which includes interdistrict and statewide public school choice. In this marketplace model, every public school competes for enrollments, on the premise that enrollment dollars are sufficient incentives for school innovation and improvement and that competition will reward the best. Eleven states have implemented varieties of statewide public school choice.

The question for any of the 'choice' programs is whether they will fix what's really wrong.

The data thus far are sketchy, except for the fact that nowhere has interdistrict choice ignited a revolution of school restructuring, parent engagement, and educational improvement as its proponents originally claimed. None of the statewide choice plans have included significant new resources for multiplying better schools or helping those at the bottom. The Massachusetts example (see the article, "Robbing the Poor to Pay the Rich," on page 23) highlights the potential fiscal nightmare for poor districts as students transfer out. Moreover, few states subsidize transportation costs for interdistrict transfers, ensuring that the class barriers to choice remain high and that outcome remain skewed.

Overall, it appears that only a small number of parents have opted for the open enrollment program, often fewer than 1%. Moreover, data that exist for four states (Minnesota, Massachusetts, Arkansas, and Arizona) indicate that choice participants are disproportionately white and affluent.

If the interdistrict and statewide choice model gains a greater hold, its flaws will have a much graver impact. The dangers include:

• **Widening the gap between education "haves" and "have-nots."** Instead of becoming a tool for reform, this choice model rationalizes and accelerates inequity. It allows already advantaged schools to cream students and resources from other districts, leaving poorer schools and their students further depleted.

• **Weakening the link between schools and local communities.** In a large-scale marketplace model, schools are no longer bound by geographical or political communities. Schools and students would become even more removed from their neighborhoods. Community control of schooling would be further eroded, making it even harder for communities of color and the poor to fight for equity and reform. Taxpayers, voters, relatives and citizens would feel even less invested in education.

• **Promoting the marketing of schools.** Where schools are competing for premium enrollments, the ability to attract students would depend as much on their ability to advertise as their capacity to educate. The obvious temptation would be for schools to rely even more heavily on standardized test scores and test-driven instruction, the "steroids approach" to performance enhancement.

The debate over school choice will be with us for a long time, even if voucher plans and private school choice options are soundly defeated. In weighing the problems and potentials, we need to keep in mind the most basic and practical question for any choice program: does it fix what's really wrong?

There is nothing inherent in school choice that deals with key issues such as smaller class and school size, teacher training, multicultural curricula, teacher-parent collaboration, youth services, or equal and adequate funding. Moreover, choice is deflecting attention from such key issues.

The hard reality is that there's no short cut to building good schools. Like parenting children, educating children is based on human relationships, the quality of which depends very much on the support systems surrounding the family and school. We have public education because we need a community and government support system to sustain this enormous undertaking, to make an unconditional investment in every child, to invest in the future as well as the present, to serve both individuals and communities.

School enrollments are not chips to be brokered in a marketplace, public or private. Even in our post-industrial consumer society, some choices are not about buying and selling. ❐

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Susan Lina Ruggles

Massachusetts: Robbing the Poor to Pay the Rich

By Stan Karp

In Massachusetts, the combination of economic recession and school "choice" reform offers a glimpse at how poorly designed public school "choice" can combine with financial pressures to push school systems in disastrous directions.

In September of 1991, Massachusetts followed years of state cuts, which had reduced education aid by over $500 million, by implementing a public school "choice" scheme. Stripped of its rhetorical trappings, the plan encouraged students to leave poor districts for rich ones.

"Participating districts" could choose to open their doors to out-of-district students. The "home" or sending districts (whether "participating" or not) were charged a "tuition" roughly equivalent to the per pupil expenditure in the receiving district. This means a child leaving a district with a $4000 per pupil average expenditure for one with a $7000 figure took $7000 of the home district's funds with him—more than the home district would have gotten if the student had stayed put.

This bizarre formula had predictable effects. About 45 districts signed on to receive students. About 830 students jumped. Just six poorer districts paid about half of the total tuition transfers, while seven wealthier districts took in about 75% of the total. The plan had no provisions for transportation aid or parent outreach services and drew little participation from poor and minority students. In fact the scheme is so unfair that a number of well-off districts at first refused to sign on, fearing the impact on neighboring systems. However, the number of districts buying into the program has steadily increased, and predictions are that the number of students transferring in the second year could rise to between 3,000 and 5,000 students, taking $15 million to $25 million with them in aid that will largely flow from poorer districts to richer ones.

The schools of Brockton have been particularly swamped by this combined onslaught of "free market" reform and "free market" recession. An NEA newsletter reported: "Brockton, just outside of Boston, once boasted of being among the top school systems in the nation. Not anymore....More than 200 Brockton educators have been laid off this school year, and the average class size is now up to 37. Assistant principals are teaching art, music, and physical education. Some classes have no coverage at all." On top of these cutbacks, the "choice" plan cost Brockton close to $1 million. Over 100 Brockton students enrolled in nearby Avon, where pupil spending runs up to two and a half times the Brockton average. "For every youngster we are losing, we will be paying three times what the state gives us for that youngster," says one school official.

These gross inequities led the state to revise the funding formula after the first year of the plan's operation. "In Massachusetts," said one Republican legislator, "we really perverted the notion of what choice was all about." But while the new formula caps the tuition transfers to wealthier districts and partially reimburses sending districts for lost aid, the basic design—and the basic injustice—of the plan remains unchanged. It's still a siphon for draining students and resources from poor districts to wealthier ones, and it still does absolutely nothing to improve education in the poorer districts. In that regard, the Massachusetts plan is not a perversion "of what choice is all about," but an all-too-accurate example. ☐

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Chicago: Public School 'Choice' and Inequality

By Jonathan Kozol

In the following selection from Savage Inequalities, *author Jonathan Kozol talks about class and racial inequities surrounding proposals for school "choice." He refers to South Loop Elementary in Chicago, a citywide magnet "fine arts" school built at the insistence of residents of a condominium project with many white, affluent families. Children from a nearby low-income public project, Hilliard Homes, are not allowed into the school until third grade. Before then, the children from the project go to a "temporary branch school" in a "small, prefabricated metal building surrounded on three sides by junkyards."*

The conflict around South Loop Elementary in Chicago helps to illustrate some of the reasons for the reservations that black leaders sometimes voice about the prospect of a fully implemented plan for "schools of choice" — a notion strongly favored by the White House and, particularly, by Mr. Bush. If the children of the Hilliard project are successfully excluded from the magnet school across the street, how much harder will it be to get those children into magnet schools in other sections of the city? And will those children "choose" to go to "schools of choice" if it is made clear they are not wanted? This is an example of the ways that people may be taught to modify and to restrict their choices. The parents, of course, conditioned already by a lifetime of such lessons, may not even need to have their dreams further restricted. The energy to break out of their isolation may have atrophied already.

'Choice' plans threaten to compound the present fact of racial segregation with the added injury of caste discrimination.

Rick Reinhard

School boards think that, if they offer the same printed information to all parents, they have made choice equally accessible. That is not true, of course, because the printed information won't be read, or certainly will not be scrutinized aggressively, by parents who can't read or who read very poorly. But, even if a city could contrive a way to get the basic facts disseminated widely, can it disseminate audacity as well? Can it disseminate the limitless horizons of the middle class to those who have been trained to keep their eyes close to ground?

People can only choose among the things they've heard of. That is one problem that a "choice" plan must confront. But it is no less true that they can only choose the things they think they have a right to and the things they have some reason to believe they will receive. People who have forever been turned down by neighborhoods where they have looked for housing and by hospitals where they have looked for care when they were ill are not likely to have hopeful expectations when it comes to public schools.

The White House, in advancing the agenda for a "choice" plan, rests its faith on market mechanisms. What reason have the black and very poor to lend their credence to a market system that has proved so obdurate and so resistant to their pleas at every turn? Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair.

There are conscientious people who believe that certain types of "choice" within the public schools can help to stimulate variety and foster deeper feelings of empowerment in parents. There are also certain models — in East Harlem in New York, for instance — which suggest that this is sometimes possible; but these models are the ones that also place a high priority on not excluding children of the less successful and less knowledgeable parents and, in the East Harlem situation, they are also models that grew out of social activism, and their faculty and principals continue to address the overarching inequalities that render their experiment almost unique. Without these countervailing forces — and they are not very often present — "choice" plans of the kind the White House has proposed threaten to compound the present fact of racial segregation with the added injury of caste discrimination, further isolating those who, like the kids at Hilliard Homes, have been forever, as it seems, consigned to places *nobody* would choose if he had any choice at all. ❑

When 'Choice' Equals No Choice

By Herbert Kohl

The first experiment with choice and vouchers that I heard about took place in the Alum Rock School District in San Jose, Calif., in the early 1970s. The district, which served many children of color and was experiencing major failure, was to be a model of public school choice. Parents would be given vouchers covering the cost of their children's education, which could be redeemed at any school in the district. The experiment fell apart in less than three years for the following reasons:

- The few decent schools were immediately oversubscribed and the communities they served didn't want to give up any places to outsiders.
- The worst schools stayed just as they were and became residue schools for students who couldn't get into the schools of their choice.
- No training or materials were provided, nor were physically depressing sites rebuilt.
- The teachers, community groups, and parents who wanted to create innovative schools to create genuine choices were denied access to funds or facilities.
- A combination of teacher organizations and administrators made sure that no person or school — no matter how dismal — was evaluated or forced to change or declare itself out of business.

Public school choice in Alum Rock, and in many other districts I have observed over the years, became no choice at all for the majority of under-served people. Business as usual was restored to the district. There was failure without accountability.

If public schools are to work, those who work in them must admit that many children have been failed by their efforts. Unless we want the entire fabric of public education to be unravelled by private school choice, new ideas and new life must enter our schools.

Short of that, we face vouchers and private schools that accept students at their whim. The children of the poorest and least empowered will be abandoned to residue schools that function as mere warehouses. ❐

Herbert Kohl is author of a number of books on education, including 36 Children *and his most recent books,* I Won't Learn from You, *and* From Archetype to Zeitgeist.

Susan Lina Ruggles

If public schools are to work, those who work in them must admit that many children have been failed by their efforts.

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School Vouchers

continued from page 5

Moe consequently look to the marketplace to create excellence in education.

Problems with Formulations

To summarize their argument, Chubb and Moe assert that public schools provide inadequate instruction because they lack the autonomy necessary to create effective education; they lack autonomy because they are bureaucratic; and they are bureaucratic because politics shapes them. Thus, they claim the way to create effective schools is to substitute the market for politics. The clarity of their argument and the simplicity of their solution, apparently buttressed by the analysis of massive data bases, may seem persuasive. But problems with their formulations abound.

First of all, Chubb and Moe assume that *A Nation at Risk*, along with less influential reports of the 1980s, provides such telling evidence of educational malfeasance that drastic measures are justified.[10] Serious questions might be raised about the test results marshalled to document this state of affairs. It is questionable whether standardized test scores can accurately gauge the nation's educational health, a point Chubb and Moe themselves make in another context.

The first choice program provided white students in Virginia public funds to attend private academies in order to avoid attending public schools with Blacks.

Even assuming such scores have value, the strategy of *A Nation at Risk* to document both declining scores within the United States and unfavorable comparisons of scores with other countries hardly withstands close scrutiny. Its authors fail to note that their data suggest only a modest decline in scores since the 1960s. They do not acknowledge the upward trajectory of scores on several tests in the 1970s and 1980s, and they also ignore tests that showed no decline.[11] Further, the report inappropriately contrasts the achievement of 12th graders in the United States with those of other countries, since the groups are not comparable. Most students in the United States reach the 12th grade, and a high percentage progresses beyond. In many other countries only an elite group completes high school. Thus international comparisons beneath the collegiate level have limited utility.[12]

Lack of evidence indicating "a rising tide of mediocrity," to use the unfortunate phrasing of *A Nation at Risk*, in no way suggests that children of color are receiving an adequate education. But it undercuts the justification of a market-based educational system for all based on the assumption that nothing could be lost by dismantling public schools. More important, Chubb and Moe fail to prove that private schools do a better job than public ones. Scholars have raised a number of questions about the data Chubb and Moe relied upon, including whether a brief multiple-choice test adequately documented student performance and whether the private school sample over-represented elite preparatory schools.[13] Although many Black and Latino families have avoided the degradations of miserable public schools by enrolling their children in Catholic institutions, the mere fact of private status obviously does not confer excellence on schools. Thus it is hardly surprising that recent data on achievement in Milwaukee's Catholic schools point out a vast chasm in student achievement between those serving high-income and low-income neighborhoods, and they suggest racial differences in performance that closely parallel those of the Milwaukee Public Schools.[14]

Even setting aside problems with their data, Chubb and Moe's claims far outstrip their findings. Despite their argument that the autonomy they associate with private schools profoundly affects student performance, in their model autonomy accounts for a tiny percentage of variance in achievement. Thus as scholars Gene Glass and DeWayne Matthews note, "A school that moves from the 5th percentile to the 95th percentile on autonomous organization would be expected ... to climb a month or so in grade equivalent units on a standardized achievement test."[15] Further, Chubb and Moe cannot even truly determine whether greater autonomy creates better students or whether better students permit more autonomous schools.[16] In addition, they cannot demonstrate that higher achievement in private schools stems from the way they are organized or from the select group of students who attend them.[17] Finally, they fail to confront the hypothesis that the real issue is not autonomy, but wider reliance on an academic curriculum in private schools — something that can be replicated in public institutions.[18]

Overstating Private School Advantages

Chubb and Moe also overstate the advantages of private schools in supporting teacher professionalism. Principals tend to have greater power in private schools, but it scarcely follows that teachers are more able to act as professionals. Unprotected by unions, the jobs of private school teachers are precarious. This vulnerability can exert greater constraints on teachers' autonomy than the bureaucratic regulations common to public schools. In addition, there is nothing professional about most private school teachers' salaries. Compensation typically too meager to support a family has meant that private school positions have been most acceptable to the independently wealthy, to members of religious orders, and to families with more than one wage earner.[19]

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Overblown bureaucracies, of course, do limit institutional change and absorb huge financial resources for little direct educational service. Chubb and Moe correctly argue that many private schools are relatively free of bureaucracy, yet Catholic schools, which enroll a high percentage of non-public students in the United States, are certainly bureaucratic institutions. More broadly, the organization of the private sector as a whole fails to confirm Chubb and Moe's notion that bureaucracy characterizes public rather than private institutions. Intricately bureaucratized corporations produce a high percentage of the nation's wealth. Business influence, in fact, had much to do with the development of bureaucratic, centralized systems of public education.[20] Recent developments, however, hold out the possibility that public schools, like innovative corporations, can balance bureaucracy with autonomy.[21] Chubb and Moe offer scant attention to reform efforts in many communities that have moved toward various forms of school-based management.[22]

Further, Chubb and Moe exaggerate when they suggest that public schools are rendered incoherent by the variety of political influences that shape them. Their pluralistic notion of educational politics fails to recognize that through most of the 20th Century schools were elite-dominated. Bureaucratic structures, in part, were designed by elites at the turn of the century to remove schools from popular political control.[23] Yet altered power relations can inspire bureaucratic measures that protect the rights of minorities and the poor. Thus recent bureaucratic regulations, engendered by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, are the real objects of conservative complaint. These have promoted desegregation, bilingual education, and education of the handicapped, institutionalizing a modicum of equity in public schools as a response to the demands of those traditionally denied power. That such regulations cannot adequately secure equality of educational opportunity does not mean that the market can do any better.

Chubb and Moe assume that the market will create quality education for everyone through the mechanism of choice. Yet choice certainly has not accomplished this in the private sector of the economy. If the affluent can choose health spas in the Caribbean and gracious homes, the poor must choose inadequate health care and delapidated housing. To the extent that those with limited resources have won forms of protection, it has not been guaranteed by the play of the market, but by governmental regulation. The conservative agenda of deregulation over the past decade has eroded those protections and greatly increased the disparity between the wealthy and the poor in the United States. A market system of education is merely an extension of deregulation and promises to compound social inequities.

In the market system promoted by Friedman, Chubb and Moe, and conservative political and corporate leaders, public taxation would guarantee relatively modest vouchers worth the same amount for every student in each state. Families, acting as consumers, would then choose the schools their children would attend. But unlike the Milwaukee program where a

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lottery determines admission, schools may choose as well. Chubb and Moe are adamant about this:

Schools must be able to define their own missions and build their own programs in their own ways, and they cannot do this if their student population is thrust on them by outsiders. They must be free to admit as many or as few students as they want, based on whatever criteria they think relevant—intelligence, interest, motivation, behavior, special needs—and they must be free to exercise their own, informal judgement about individual applicants.[24]

Choosing the Advantaged

It is in their interest to choose those students who are already high achievers, and it is in their interest — especially for smaller schools — to accept those whose families can supplement the amount of the voucher they are given. Friedman's version of the plan would allow individual families the right to add their own cash to a voucher. Chubb and Moe would allow local districts to augment the value of vouchers through increased local taxation. In either case, the wealthy would have greater choice than the poor.

Advocates of an educational marketplace, then, have won a significant ideological victory by successfully labelling their program "choice" rather than the more neutral sounding "voucher." While no one in their right mind would deny families educational options, "choice" obscures the reality that those who come from economically empowered families are those most likely to be chosen by good schools. As in the marketplace writ large, what one can purchase depends on how much currency is brought to the transaction.

Choice also obscures how the already advantaged would benefit financially at the expense of the less fortunate. A reduced tax rate would provide the well-to-do with a voucher for part of their tuition for private schools. This contrasts favorably with the current situation which requires them to pay higher taxes for public schools in addition to relying solely on their own resources if they choose private institutions. Such a tax advantage, obvious in the Friedman plan, would exist in the Chubb and Moe variant as well since wealthy districts' decisions to raise taxes above the lower limit would be offset by the abolition of federal and state-level taxation that redistributes resources to poor districts. For the poor, in contrast, the baseline vouchers would be difficult to add on to, creating a situation reminiscent of Southern Jim Crow education where vast differences existed between per pupil expenditures for Black and White schools.

Under Jim Crow it was common for African Americans to supplement meager public funding by constructing schoolhouses with their own donated labor and paying teachers out of their inadequate incomes.[25] But Blacks could not rectify these inequities despite extraordinary sacrifices. As the scholar W.E.B. DuBois maintained, if some of these starved schools managed to achieve excellence through unusual efforts, greater funding would have made such excellence far more widespread.[26]

A voucher system of education can provide support for long-established community-based education programs that have effectively served children of color on shoestring budgets. But as the failure of the Juanita Virgil Academy suggests, the notion that choice would create a nation of small, effective schools is a construction as mythical as the notion that the market can maintain a nation of shopkeepers. A high level of capitalization and economies of scale would be necessary to construct buildings, to conduct advertising campaigns, to maintain staffing with an unpredictable number of students, and to make do with the unsupplemented vouchers those without wealth would bring. A likely result would be educational versions of fast-food conglomerates, with scripted teacher behaviors similar to

'Choice' and Public School Reform

By Robert Peterkin

The following is excerpted from remarks by Robert Peterkin before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor in November 1990. Peterkin, who at the time was superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, testified on the Milwaukee public schools and the private school "choice" program in Milwaukee under which several hundred low-income families received $2,500 in taxpayer money to send their children to a non-sectarian private school. Peterkin is a senior lecturer at Harvard University, where he heads the urban superintendency program.

The most damaging myth [about choice] is the one being advanced by the so-called free market educational experts. They contend that if poor parents are allowed to send their children to private schools at public expense the competition will force the public schools to improve. Indeed, at a national forum on choice Tuesday morning in Washington , former Governor Pete Du Pont said the Milwaukee choice program had forced the entire Milwaukee school system to turn itself upside down to try to improve.

That, Mr. Chairman, is a lie.

Even before my arrival two and a half years ago, the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors made the decision to reform the 150 schools under its jurisdiction. ...

Before there was ever a murmur about choice, this district had moved to downsize and decentralize its bureaucracy, to empower teachers and schools, to activate parents, to rewrite a dormant curriculum, to involve the greater community in the education of its children, and to establish high-level and very public standards of accountability.

Choice had nothing, I repeat, nothing, to do with those efforts which were begun by individuals of good will who held close to their hearts a burning desire to provide an education of excellence and equity to all children.

the standardized patter of McDonald's order clerks. Like 19th Century charity schools, such schools would compose the bottom tier of an educational hierarchy based on privilege.

Aside from the inequities associated with a market-based approach to schooling, such a strategy raises fundamental issues of educational purpose. Should taxpayers contribute to financing schools that have no public accountability no matter how objectionable many might find their goals? Should the public subsidize elite prep schools, schools run for profit, schools with racist ideologies, and schools run by corporations to train future workers? Should families be regarded as entrepreneurial units charged with maximizing their children's educational opportunities? This market ethos ignores any sense of responsibility for other children's education, any obligation for community control of education, any commitment to schools as sites of democratic discourse, any need for the new common curriculum some educators are forging out of the cultural works and political struggles of the diverse peoples who have shaped the United States.

Conservatives Exacerbate Differences

It is no small irony that so many conservatives have accused the multiculturalist movement of balkanization when their own policies have profoundly exacerbated the real differences that exist between groups in the United States. Certainly Republicans are not solely responsible for a long history of governmental policies that have developed suburban preserves for middle-class whites at the expense of urban economies inhabited by the poor and people of color.[27] Yet since the early 1980s regressive tax reform, diminished social services, and a benign attitude toward the flight of manufacturing jobs beyond U.S. borders have significantly increased the disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Already by 1983, according to historian Robert Weisbrot, "the cumulative impact of Reagan's policies involved a $25 billion transfer in disposable income from the less well-off to the richest fifth of Americans, and a rise in the number of poor people from 29.3 million in 1980 to 35.3 million."[28]

There are now signs that the strategy of suburbanization is yielding to urban gentrification as professional jobs in the service sector replace blue-collar positions. Historian Kenneth Jackson has indicated that rising fuel, land, mortgage, and housing costs, along with changes in family organization, make suburban living less desirable.[29] In addition, privatization is a major incentive for the affluent to resettle in cities where inadequate revenues are starving public services. Increasingly in cities, where deindustrialization and reduced federal aid have devastated public spaces, urban professionals are paying only for those services that benefit themselves. These enclaves of privilege support private country clubs, private security guards, private road repair services, and private schools.[30]

Adding to such services, choice is a way of subsidizing urban professionals' taste for private education in environments where even the best public schools do not always accommodate them. Although virtually every city has magnet schools which disproportionately

continued on next page

Rick Reinhard

concentrate school districts' resources on college preparatory programs for middle-class children, they typically practice at least a rudimentary form of equity that requires some degree of racial balance, and they cannot guarantee admission to all white middle-class applicants. As choice invites suburbanites back to the city to enjoy their private pursuits at the expense of reinvigorated public services, they will displace and further marginalize the poor.

In the conservative imagination the divestment of state redistributive functions does not terminate responsibility for the less fortunate. Rather, such responsibility becomes voluntary, an act of private choice. Much, in fact, is made of the public spiritedness of the affluent who voluntarily participate in contributing to the common good. Enormous publicity, for instance, has attended the offer of New York businessman Eugene Lange and several others to guarantee college scholarships to low-income school children, as well as to provide various supportive academic and counseling services to see them through high school. Oddly, we hear little about the federally funded TRIO programs that realized such practices worked decades ago. They have a long record of demonstrated success limited only by funding that is inadequate to reach more than a small percentage of the eligible population.[31] Massive federal support of such initiatives, in fact, is paramount because Lange and a few other philanthropists devoted to equity are exceptions. As policy analyst Robert Reich has pointed out, the wealthy contribute a lower percentage of their incomes to charitable purposes than the poor, and what they do give is disproportionately dispensed on elite cultural activities and institutions that serve themselves. Further, Reich notes that the much ballyhooed support of corporations for public schools is less than what they receive in the tax breaks they have successfully won.[32] Choice in giving, like choice in selecting private schools, provides a poor case that private spending will support public goods.

None of this is to say that public schools are beyond reproach. If they adequately served children of color, interest in "choice" would be limited and efforts to secure multicultural education unnecessary. Typically, students in public schools have suffered curricula that are ethnocentric and unquestioningly nationalistic. They also have experienced wide variation in academic quality based on their race and class. Author Jonathon Kozol, for instance, poignantly describes such grave inequities between public schools, underscoring the obvious unfairness of favoring the already advantaged with disproportionate resources.[33] Thus it might make sense to restrict choice programs to the underserved.[34]

Opposition to Affirmative Action

This clearly is not what the Bush administration has in mind, however, since it steadfastly has opposed affirmative action. The Republican administration and conservative groups like the Landmark Legal Center for Civil Rights, which defended the Milwaukee Choice Program in the courts while it opposed the 1990 Civil Rights Act, merely view the Milwaukee program as an opening gambit in an effort to institute vouchers for everyone.[35] This agenda is explicit in a proposal for California initiated by the Excellence through Choice in

Education League. The league's nearly successful effort to place a state-wide measure on the November 1992 ballot mandating vouchers for all was articulated initially as a measure to serve low-income families only.[36]

If public education has inadequately fulfilled its responsibilities to educate all, market-driven educational enterprise cannot fulfill them. At best the popularity of choice among those with the least privilege should send a powerful message to public school educators that the common school for many remains a myth. It highlights the need to support a multicultural agenda that widens public discourse on equity issues and transforms public education in ways that enable people of color to exercise co-ownership of society. Yet the very idea of schools that educate people in common — drawing on the richness of diversity — is antithetical to the intent of the conservative leaders and foundations advocating choice.

Early in the 20th Century corporate elites claimed to take the schools out of politics by creating expert-run centralized and bureaucratic public schools. Their demand for efficiency and impartial expertise masked a politically motivated effort to replace working-class influence over education with their own influence. Today Chubb and Moe articulate the position of corporate elites who rail against the bureaucratic schools their predecessors were so influential in creating, once more claiming they want to take schools out of politics. Yet their desire to open them to the marketplace is also an inherently political strategy. It will enable the more affluent to free themselves from the yoke of all the legislative and legal safeguards people have won through the freedom struggles of the 1960s. It furthermore will free the rich from all public educational responsibility, striking a major blow against the current multiculturalist effort that seeks a radical expansion of democracy and a reinvigorated vision of community. The implementation of "choice" would be a victory for narrow class interest over community, accelerating the drastic maldistribution of opportunity that exists today. ❐

Robert Lowe is an editor of Rethinking Schools *and teaches at National-Louis University. A version of this essay appears in Theresa Perry and James Fraser, eds.,* Freedom's Plow: Teaching for a Multicultural Democracy, (Routledge, 1993).

Footnotes:

1. Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education, in Robert A. Solow, ed., *Economics and the Public Interest* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

2. The most notorious instance of this occurred in Prince Edward County where public schools were closed for five years. Blacks too were offered vouchers, but committed to desegregation they refused and many children received no formal education during that period. See J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 96-100.

3. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

4. See especially National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983).

5. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).

6. See, for instance, *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 23, 1990.

7. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 20, 1990, p. 7; October 22, 1990, p. 8.

8. *New York Times*, June 12, 1991, p. B9.

9. *Wisconsin DPI Bulletin* 2(August 16, 1991):3. The most dramatic drop in returning students took place at the Harambee Community School where only 19 returned of the 79 non-graduating participants. See *Milwaukee Journal*, October 3, 1991, p. A21.

10. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.*

11. See Lawrence C. Stedman and Carl F. Kaestle, "The Test Score Decline Is Over: Now What?" *Phi Delta Kappan* (November 1985): 204-210; Lawrence C. Stedman and Marshall S. Smith, "Weak Arguments Poor Data, Simplistic Recommendations," in Beatrice and Ronald Gross, eds. *The Great School Debate* (New York: Touchstone, 1985): 83-105.

12. Stedman and Smith, p. 90.

13. See, for example, Peter H. Rossi and James D. Wright, "Best Schools—Better Discipline or Better Students? A Review of High School Achievement," *American Journal of Education* 91 (November 1982): 82; comments on John Witte's unpublished paper presented at 1990 meeting of American Political Science Association, *Education Week*, November 14, 1990, p. 20.

14. *Milwaukee Journal*, August 1,1991: 1, 8.

15. Gene V. Glass and DeWayne A. Matthews, "Are Data Enough?" *Educational Researcher* 20 (April 1991):26.

16. Ibid., p. 25.

17. On this issue see Richard Murnane, "Evidence, Analysis, and Unanswered Questions," *Harvard Educational Review* 51(November 1981):485-487.

18. *Education Week*, November 14, 1990, p. 20; also see Douglas Willms, "Do Private Schools Produce Higher Levels of Academic Achievement?" in Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, eds., *Public Dollars for Private Schools: the Case of Tuition Tax Credits* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 230-231.

19. See Peter W. Cookson, Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell, *Preparing for Power:America's Elite Boarding Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 84-93.

20. David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), part IV.

21. Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Corporations* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 318.

22. Richard Elmore and Associates, *Restructuring Schools: The Next Generation of Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

23. Tyack, *The One Best System*, pp. 132-133.

24. Chubb and Moe, pp. 221-222.

25. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1861 to 1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

26. W.E.B., "Pechstein and Pechsniff," *The Crisis* 36 (September 1929):314.

27. Policies have included federal highway subsidies, segregationist FHA loans, zoning ordinances, and legal standing for restrictive covenants. See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 293. Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1985), p. 217.

28. Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York:Plume, 1991), p. 302.

29. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 297-303.

30. See, for instance, Robert B. Reich, "Secession of the Successful," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 20, 1991, p.42.

31. See *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 3, 1991, p. A17.

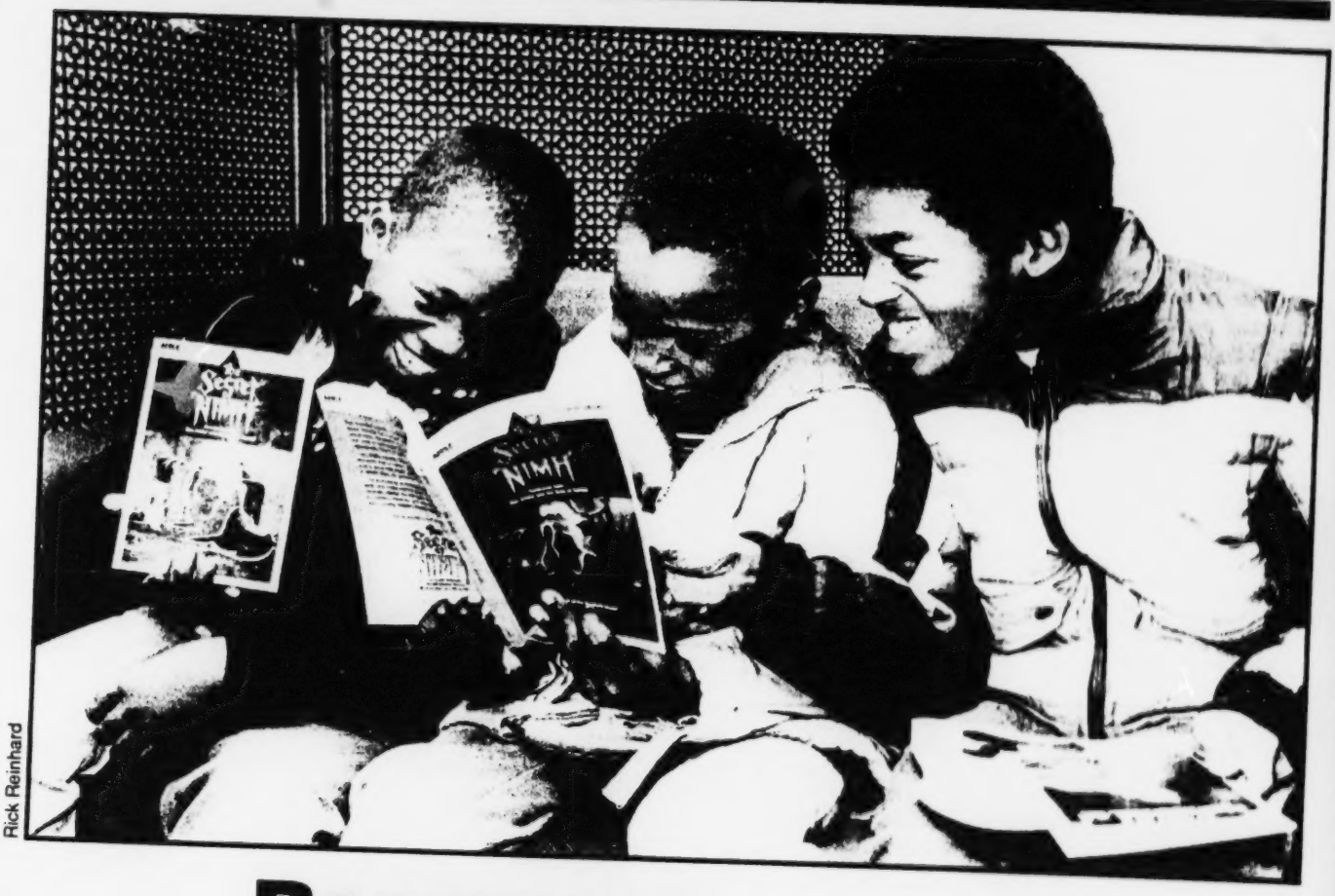
32. Reich, "Secession of the Successful," pp. 43, 44.

33. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

34. From advocacy of choice programs with redistributive goals, see John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The case for Family Control* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 31; Henry M. Levin, "Educational Choice and the Pains of Democracy," in James and Levin, *Public Dollars for Private Schools*, pp. 38-27.

35. The Landmark Legal Center is funded in part by the Bradley Foundation—*Milwaukee Journal*, July 23, 1990, pp. 1,4; for its opposition to the 1990 Civil Rights Act, see *New York Times*, October 21, 1990, p. 15.

36. *Education Week*, September 18, 1991, p. 1.



Rick Reinhard

Resources

The most influential work that develops a theoretical argument in support of vouchers:

Politics, Markets, and America's Schools, by John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1990.

Two useful critiques of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*:

"School Organization and Student Achievement: A Review Essay," by David Hogan, *Educational Theory* 42 (Winter 1992): 83-105

Politics, Markets and America's Schools: The Fallacies of Private School Choice, by Albert Shanker, American Federation of Teachers, 1991.

An argument for regulated voucher plans:

Education By Choice: The Case for Family Control, by John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.

A critique of vouchers based on the development of a democratic theory of education:

Democratic Education, by Amy Gutmann, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, Chapter 2.

An eloquent defense of egalitarian public education:

Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools, by Jonathan Kozol, New York, Crown, 1991.

Collections of essays that provide various perspectives on the "choice" issue:

Public Dollars for Private Schools: the Case of Tuition Tax Credits, Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, eds., Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983.

Choice and Control in American Education, William H. Clune and John F. Witte, eds., Bristol, Penn., Falmer Press, 1990, 2 volumes.

Choice in Education: Potential and Problems, by William Lowe Boyd and Herbert Walberg, eds., Berkeley, McCutchan, 1990.

False Choices, Why School Vouchers Threaten Our Children's Future, Robert Lowe and Barbara Miner, eds., a special 32-page edition of *Rethinking Schools*, Milwaukee, Wisc., Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 1992.

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